3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
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CHAPTER 10

Gullah Attitudes Toward Death and the Supernatural

"En when I trabbles de deep woods, whey de moss wabe low en Mr. Cooter lib en Mr. Moccasin crawl en de firefly flicker—meh packet fer load.
Yas'm. I'm ready fer em. Gunpowder en sulpher. Dey es say Plat Eye can't stan dem smell mix. . . . So I totes meh powder en sulpher en I carries stick in meh han en puts meh truss in Gawd."*

Gullah's attached a tremendous significance to death, but there was little evidence of apprehension at the prospect of dying. Slaves lived in the presence of death so constantly that they seemed to consider the phenomenon as much a part of living as was their continuous labor. That they often reflected on the subject is evident in their spirituals. Yet these songs do not indicate that Gullahs thought of death with fear, foreboding, or morbidity. Perhaps it was partly this stoicism in the face of earthly demise that some observers viewed as resignation or the effects of demoralization. All African ethnic groups believed in life beyond physical death. Possibly Gullahs retained the West African bush-initiation experience in their attitude toward death. This idea of a symbolic journey to the world of the dead and a triumphant return might explain the Gullahs' ability to transcend feelings of dread about death and to disavow its ultimate power over them. But perhaps an equally strong influence was the BaKongo, since these societies had the most elaborate afterlife beliefs. The BaKongo four moments of the sun, as previously discussed,

*"Truss Gawd." South Carolina Folklore Project #1655, D-4-33, WPA, SCL.

533 enjoyed at parties. Congregational singing in church is
535 often accompanied by dance movements and clapping, particu-
[196] larly on the part of older women. Story telling is also a
538 highly valued activity, with males of all ages being especi-
888 ally skilled at this art. With old age, the obligation to
538 remember and relate oral history of importance to the family
or the social group is placed upon both males and females.
Young people spend many hours with old people, listening to
these historical accounts and to the stories of ghosts and
spirits which abound in the area.

621 The closed community of the island can be usefully
compared to more open black communities on the nearby main-
land. Three different island residents expressed spontane-
ously, at different times, their appreciation for living in
a community where "nobody bothered you." The closed nature
of the community makes for less interference from the domi-
nant whites. Land ownership and a relatively long history
464 of independent conduct of their daily affairs on the island
484 has made for self confidence and willingness to try new jobs
[157] and live in unknown cities at least for short periods of
time. Islanders frequently live and work off the island
[166] during their middle years, returning to live on the land
owned by their families in their old age or when their aging
parents need their help. Geographic isolation has also meant
limited job choices, however. Those who engaged in business
or professional occupations have been able to remain on the

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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shake; to keep silent in the presence of elders and otherwise to show respect for age. Some of the missionaries who arrived on St. Helena Island shortly after the opening of the Civil War were indignant at the harsh treatment the children received at the hands of their parents. "I don't suppose these children ever received a caress or a word of tenderness since they were infants," wrote Arthur Sumner. "The children are invariably spoken to in harsh and peremptory tones by all grown niggers, and are whipped unmercifully on the least offence. Yet they are very obedient to their parents, and certainly stand much more in awe of adult darkies than they do of us mild-eyed missionaries."[29] Miss Towne concluded that parents were not really harsh to their children, but that their rough way of ordering them about, threatening to "skin um 'live" and to "bro'k um back," merely sounded savage. All visitors to the Sea Islands, either as guests of the master before the War or as missionaries, agreed that the children, despite the rough treatment from their parents and despite the fact that they seemed to have no games,[30] were a happy, carefree lot. Sir Charles Lyell thought the Hopeton plantation children had "such bright, happy faces when three or four years old, and from that age to ten or twelve . . . such frank and confiding manners, as to be very engaging."[31] Yet all were horrified by the fact that their mothers permitted them to run about in summer completely nude, a practice which people of today, with their recent adoption of the sunbath theory, would be inclined to approve.

[29] Arthur Sumner Papers, St. Helena Island, July 9, 1863.
[30] *Letters from Port Royal*, p. 192n.
[31] Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, I, 263.

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against teaching slaves to read had long been in abeyance when Sunday schools began to be organized among them early in the ante-bellum period. Masters usually encouraged their people to attend these Sabbath schools and often delegated their own children to do the teaching. The reaction against the Abolition agitation led many planters to fear the consequence of their people's learning to read. Accordingly, the Sunday school movement was largely abandoned after 1835; nevertheless, on every plantation there were always some slaves who either were taught to read with the permission of the master or who picked up the knowledge clandestinely. Miss Towne found on St. Helena Island in 1862 a cabinet maker, Will Capers, who could read and write and who hoped the Government would pay him for teaching his fellows. He told her that he conducted a secret night school for men during plantation days.[84] Nevertheless, it was unusual for a slave to know his letters, and most of them could not count beyond, "one, two, five, eight, ten."[85]

For the most part, sea-island planters found their laborers mild and forgiving, quick to start a quarrel, but as quick to forget it. Sir Charles Lyell thought that there were more broken heads among the Irish in a few years when they came to dig the Brunswick Canal than had been known among the coastal Negroes for half a century.[86] They were a good natured, happy people, making the most of their lot, forgetting the work of the day in their hours of "pleasuring."

[84] *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, p. 27.

[85] Towne, "Pioneer Work on the Sea Islands," *Southern Workman*, July, 1901. Miss Towne, however, could not have come in contact with the house servants, but only with the field hands.

[86] Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, I, 266.